

This article was downloaded by: [University of Tasmania]

On: 07 November 2013, At: 16:34

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjoe20>

### Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life

Erika Altmann<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Consultant School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania  
Published online: 05 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Erika Altmann (2013) Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life, Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 15:4, 582-584, DOI: [10.1080/1523908X.2013.852781](https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2013.852781)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2013.852781>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

**Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life**

C. Gibson, C. Farbotko, N. Gill, L. Head, &amp; G. Waitt

*Edward Elgar, 2013, 237 pp., £75.00, ISBN 978 1 78100 621 4*

Issues of sustainability have received an increasing amount of attention over the past decade. However, much of the academic discussion around sustainability takes a big picture view. Gibson *et al.* address both the big picture and the micro level with thought-provoking thoroughness.

Centred at the household level, this book covers 19 common issues confronting households in their search to live a 'green' lifestyle. Along with the dilemma of sifting through a broad range of often contradictory information, our attitudes to the material nature of current lifestyles are questioned. The focus of this book is on the small steps that household's take to reduce their environmental footprint and the dilemmas they face in doing so. What exactly are we willing to give up to be green? Yearly mobile phone and computer upgrades perhaps? It takes a cradle to grave approach considering the dilemma of young families using disposable nappies through to how to decrease the environmental footprint of dying, and almost everything in between. The authors probe how households balance competing priorities of sustainability, with often surprising results. Each chapter contains something to make us question our own practices. For example, the chapter on laundry highlights the inconsistencies faced by consumers when accessing information. The focus in Australia is about reducing water consumption; therefore front-loading washing machines are appropriate. However, consumers need to balance this against the effect of increased energy consumption.

Gibson *et al.* go on to link these issues of sustainability at the wider societal level. As the authors state 'home spaces and the people and things that live in them are inextricably linked into the social, technological and regulatory networks that make up suburbs, cities, regions and nation' (p. 7). This work will therefore be of interest to those working in areas of housing and environmental sustainability at the micro level since the focus is on what individuals within each household do. Indeed it holds appeal for each individual that enacts sustainability measures at the household level. It will also be of interest to policy-makers and environmental educators since how the individual addresses environmental sustainability has implications within a wider social context. With a unique blend of science and technology, planning and sociological research, this book is likely to become an important text for those studying sustainability issues and material culture well into the future.

Households and the practices that they enact are an important societal sector in addressing climate change. The materiality of home, what is bought into the home and how the resultant waste is disposed of are significant human actions on a global scale. Western consumerist lifestyles are contrasted with the lower environmental footprints of individuals in poorer countries and the extent of recycling that individuals in these countries engage with. Yet even within western society the extent to which some households engage with sustainable practices differs. The information available to make sound choices is often lacking and what one person considers a sustainable practice may lead to un-thought-of environmental harm. Media and policy messages are shown as confusing and fail to take on the differing needs of individual households. This is partly due to differences in life stages though it also highlights a rural-city divide and

generational differences. Older generations that have suffered the socio-economic deprivation of the depression and war years appear to engage with sustainability practices at an unconscious level. From the individual household perspective comparisons can be made with poorer countries that take even less from the environment. There is no need for them to 'be green'.

The strength of this book is the sound academic research combined with an extensive literature review. Both add significantly to our understanding of the material nature of what and how much we take from the natural environment. It tells us what the likely results might be and assesses avenues that households may take in an effort to reduce individual environmental footprints. Though the materiality of the home environment has been extensively studied in other forums, the authors have taken this concept further by applying cultural norms of the lived household experience and associated rampant consumerism, linking it with current environmental problems occurring at both a local and global scale. The engaging style adopted by the authors makes this an engrossing and thought-provoking read.

Despite the significant contribution that this book makes to our understanding of household sustainability, there are weaknesses to this work. First, the focus is on a largely diminishing population of broad-acre nuclear households. An increasing number of people have a compact city lifestyle and extol its virtues based on notions of sustainability. However, the impact of increasing densification of cities is not commented on. Hagan (2012) for example questions notions of sustainability based on the compact city model. Pucher and Buehler's (2008) seminal work is missing here. Issues of retrofitting for environmental sustainability do not question how it occurs within apartment complexes, or the complex decision-making processes involved for these urban dwellers. Hauge *et al.* (2012) provide one of many relevant descriptions here. As Reid *et al.* (2010) states, the boundaries of what constitutes a household is changing. The authors of this book provide merely two passages that refer to the difficulties faced by apartment and communal living households and their quest for household sustainability. Chapter 10 which discusses car usage and links this to global issues of oil shortages and carbon emissions, fails to tap into other notions of sustainable transport such as public transport, cycling and walking. Second, key themes remain under developed. For example issues of water and dirt are focused on in some sections, but missed in others. Yet ridding ourselves of what society considers dirty (whether personal hygiene or laundry) affects the way in which we use water and how much of it we use. Water and household sustainability are not just about water tanks and water metres. Third, there are occasional inconsistencies in the structure of each chapter. Discussions of 'what to do' are from time to time interspersed with detailed interviewee comments or become summarized text. Rarely do the questions raised lead to succinct policy advice. What it does provide is a sense of broader issues that policy-makers need to take into account and their effect at both the micro and macro level of society.

The implications raised by the authors apply to households within western cultures and emergent middle classes globally. The materiality of the home and the practices of being green that each individual enacts are linked to wider society. Gibson *et al.* demonstrate this admirably by linking passive consumerism to global problems of sustainability and climate change. This significant work is central to understanding the barriers that households encounter when enacting

sustainability measures by focusing on the practices of a largely silent population. As such it is likely to become a seminal work.

## References

- Hagan, S. (2012) What environmental advantages might low densities have? Overcoming architects' conventional antipathy to suburbs, metabolic suburbs, or the virtue of low densities, *ARQ—Architectural Research Quarterly*, 16(1), pp. 9–13.
- Hauge, A., Magnus, E., Denizou, K. & Oyen, C. (2012) The meaning of rehabilitation of multi-story housing for the residents, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 29(4), pp. 358–381.
- Pucher, J. & Buehler, R. (2008) Making cycling irresistible: Lessons from the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany, *Transport Reviews*, 28(4), pp. 495–528.
- Reid, L., Sutton, P. & Hunter, C. (2010) Theorizing the meso level: The household as a crucible of pro-environmental behaviour, *Progress in Human Geography*, 34 (3), pp. 309–327.

Erika Altmann

Consultant

School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania

© 2013 Erika Altmann

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2013.852781>